

## Service-Learning and Critical Emotion Studies: On the Perils of Empathy and the Politics of Compassion

**Lisa Langstraat**

*Colorado State University*

**Melody Bowdon**

*University of Central Florida*

*This article explores the mutually enriching bodies of scholarship in service-learning and Critical Emotion Studies with a focus on empathy and compassion, which, perhaps more than any other emotions, hold a prominent place in service-learning literature. We offer an overview of nascent research on empathy and compassion in Critical Emotion Studies and we review the ways in which empathy and compassion commonly circulate in service-learning literature. Finally, we discuss a specific service-learning course, "Literature of HIV/AIDS," to demonstrate strategies for addressing the perils of empathy and the politics of compassion in service-learning pedagogy and scholarship.*

Any teacher-scholar who conscientiously engages with students' service-learning reflections is quickly reminded that service-learning can bring to the fore many emotional dynamics of learning that remain implicit—or even actively negated—in other educational theories and practices. Certainly service-learning researchers have noted that, given its experiential nature, service-learning has the potential to enhance students' intellectual and emotional development; moreover, we have accrued strong evidence that service-learning increases student motivation and improves student attitudes toward education and toward service generally (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Dahms (1994) argues that service-learning is an effective means of helping students develop their "emotional comfort zones" (p. 92), especially in relation to learning about issues of diversity. However, most attention to the emotionality of service-learning pedagogies remains undertheorized or only implicitly addressed in the literature, and when emotions are discussed in some detail, rarely are they understood in light of social justice issues or the politics of emotion. For example, Felten, Gilchrist, and Darby (2006) make a persuasive case that emotion should be taken seriously in the reflection process: "Integrating emotion into the service-learning literature would mean we re-define effective reflection in service-learning as a process involving the interplay of emotion and cognition in which people (students, teachers, and community partners) intentionally connect service experiences with academic learning objectives" (p. 42, emphasis in original). While this insight compels a reconsideration of the role of emotion in service-learning reflection, it does not overtly wrangle with

the politics of emotions or what philosopher Allison Jaggar calls "emotional hegemony"—the phenomenon by which certain emotions are deemed epistemically valued while others are judged suspect or ineffective. Emotional hegemony is, of course, deeply embedded in race, gender, and class politics, as Jaggar (1992) notes in a discussion of the ways in which women have historically been deemed more emotional and less reasonable than men.

In this article, we suggest that in genuinely reciprocal, sustainable service-learning efforts, students and community members must consciously engage in an analysis of emotional hegemony. Such analysis often involves reconsidering deeply-held beliefs and feelings about ourselves, our communities, and our interactions with the scholarship that informs our service-learning courses. This exploration may be a precondition for the genuine social awareness and action that are important, though often implicit, objectives of many service-learning endeavors. Yet, while service-learning creates powerful opportunities to engage with and develop greater understanding of the politics of emotion, there has, until very recently, been a paucity of research on the social dynamics of emotions in pedagogical theory and practice. This oversight is likely a result of two influences: (a) the association of emotions with the realm of private, individual experience, rather than the public realm of culture; and (b) a broad attitude of disdain or anxiety surrounding the conflation of education and emotion, an attitude partially rooted in a positivistic tradition that casts emotion as immeasurable or so unwieldy that meaningful discussion of our affective lives is deemed off limits in the public space of the class-

room. Despite these forces in the academic climate, the last decade has seen an explosion of multidisciplinary research on emotions; the result is the development of the field called Critical Emotion Studies. While Critical Emotion Studies encompasses a broad and complex range of disciplines and topics of inquiry, it shares, as Trainor (2008) notes, three central assumptions: that emotions and reason are not distinct, but are intertwined in all decision-making processes; that emotions, rather than being limited to individual and private experiences, are socially constructed and experienced, particularly through language; and that every culture inculcates “emotion rules” that serve to produce and reproduce dominant cultural values and norms (p. 22).

Here we seek to explore the mutually enriching bodies of scholarship in service-learning and Critical Emotion Studies within the context of the contemporary academy and classroom. We focus primarily on empathy and compassion, which hold a prominent place in service-learning literature. We begin by offering an overview of nascent research on empathy and compassion in Critical Emotion Studies. We then review the ways in which empathy and compassion circulate in much service-learning literature, arguing that too often these emotions are undertheorized or uncritically characterized as unmitigated goods and automatic outcomes. Finally, we offer an example of the ways empathy and compassion circulate in a service-learning course, “Literature of HIV/AIDS,” in an effort to demonstrate concrete strategies for explicitly addressing the perils of empathy and the politics of compassion in service-learning pedagogy and scholarship.

### Empathy, Compassion, and Critical Emotion Studies

Empathy and compassion have emerged as vital subjects for research in fields as diverse as Neuroscience and Cultural Studies. Recently, neuroscientists and evolutionary psychologists, buttressed by advances in imaging technologies that allow researchers to identify empathy circuits in the brain, have made the case that empathy is a hardwired feature of human biology. The discovery of *mirror neurons* has been integral to this line of argument. While observing a scene of another person’s distress, most humans experience the activation of neurons in the same regions of their brains that are activated in the brains of the person they are observing—hence the term “mirror” neurons (Watson & Greenberg, 2009). In other words, when we empathize, we are simulating some features of another human’s experience within ourselves, and this mirroring capability, according to many biologists, reflects an evolutionary

drive; our innate capacity to empathize with other humans, to experience fellow-feeling and develop communal relationships, may have been vital for the survival of our species (see Keen, 2007; Pfeifer & Dapretto, 2009; Watson & Greenberg). Neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran amusingly dubs mirror neurons, “Dalai Lama neurons,” to call attention to their profoundly important role in empathetic engagement (in Trout, 2009, p. 29). Marco Iacoboni, director of the Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation Lab at UCLA, explains how these neurons affect our interpretations of interactions with others: “Mirror neurons help us to read [others’] facial expression and actually make us feel the suffering or the pain of the other person” (Iacoboni, 2008, p. 5). Iacoboni believes that up to 20 percent of our brain cells are devoted to this process of mirroring which, he argues, is “the foundation of empathy and possibly of morality, a morality that is deeply rooted in biology” (p. 5).

This may raise the question of why humans have so much difficulty relating to one another. If one in five of our brain cells are working to help us make connections, one might hope that we’d be better at it. But the research suggests that these empathy-driven cells are working to *predict* behavior, motives, intentions, and feelings, rather than to decode them after they have been fully expressed. Our brains give us the ability to “read minds” according to Baron-Cohen (1997) and we spend significant time looking at people, listening to them, and drawing conclusions about what they are feeling, what physical actions they might take, and so on. Our predictions for the behavior of others are based on our own life experiences; thus these neurons and other tools for empathizing do not ensure accurate interpretation of others’ feelings. Moreover, the mere presence of mirror neurons does not necessarily guarantee that we will experience empathy uniformly across populations. Citing research on limbic impulses—the “urges we feel as our emotions and motivation combine into immediate desires” —Trout (2009) argues that people are more likely to experience intensive empathetic responses to someone whom they perceive to be like them because that similarity sparks stronger feelings of connectivity and desire (p. 24). This penchant calls attention to the limits of empathy as a means to social justice. Trout explains:

Demographic gaps are spanned when we empathize. We are more likely to help people and plan for their well-being when we focus on our attachment or similarity to others, as with kinship and friendship. These similarities help us to ‘merge our identities’ with others, and so feel more concern for our neighbors, taking action on their behalf. But it is awfully risky to tie the fate of those worse off to our fragile exer-

cises in sentimentality, or to our voyeuristic attempts to understand strangers very different from us, which are performed at our discretion and can be pushed aside as a matter of caprice or mood. (p. 232)

Trout's (2009) concerns about the limits of hard-wired empathetic reactions overlap with the insights of Critical Emotion Studies. In popular parlance (and in much service-learning scholarship) the terms "empathy" and "compassion" are often used interchangeably, and different disciplines assume different definitions of these terms. In an effort to build a shared vocabulary, however, we draw from the work of philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2001), who identifies notable differences between these emotions. Nussbaum explains that empathy entails an "imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience, without any particular evaluation of that experience" (p. 302). We might experience an empathetic response to events that are sad or joyous, pleasant or painful. Compassion, however, is a much more specific, painful emotion "occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune" (Nussbaum, p. 301). Compassion is usually more intense and entails both judgment *and* action, unlike empathy, which may result only in a judgment (e.g., "I feel bad for that person," versus, "I feel bad because this is unjust and I am going to act to change that injustice."). Hence, while both compassion and empathy require the capacity for fellow-feeling, compassion demands forms of ethical appraisal and action not necessarily inherent to the feeling of empathy.

Compassion might therefore be understood as a more fully social and political emotion than empathy. Compassion is predicated on three, coalescing principles: It requires an understanding of suffering as serious; it is grounded in the belief that the sufferer does not deserve to suffer; and it forges identification between the sufferer and those who feel compassion (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 306). Compassion thus builds solidarity and commitment amongst otherwise unrelated individuals; it necessitates valuing another person because the suffering represents an injustice (remember, the sufferer does not deserve to suffer) that could be perpetrated on and could lead to similarly painful events in the life of the person feeling compassion. Moreover, compassion is not a personal emotion that exists only in a private relationship between two people; instead, the injustice that is the source of suffering, as well as the evaluation of that injustice, are directly connected to shared social and political values. It is because compassion involves ethical judgments and calls us to action that we put forward an enhanced capacity for and understanding of compassion, rather than empathy, as a primary objective of service-learning. But our call for com-

passion is more than a quibble about word choice. Because compassion includes identification with other humans, an evaluation of injustice and suffering, and ethical actions in response to that evaluation, it is integral to service-learning objectives.

Yet, compassion is also a complex, risky emotion, and because it carries such uncritically positive connotations in popular use, compassion can easily mask unequal power relations. It has therefore garnered significant attention in Critical Emotion Studies. In particular, scholars are concerned with two interrelated issues in the politics of compassion: the potential for vastly unequal power relations between those who suffer and those who feel compassion, and the question of whether the actions borne from compassion can effectively lead to social justice (see Ahmed, 2002; Berlant, 2004; Spelman, 2001; Woodward, 2004). Both of these issues are deeply connected to understanding emotions as socially constructed and deeply enmeshed in power relations. Spelman's *Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering* (1997) is one of the foremost treatments of the ways compassion reflects the ethics of privilege. Spelman wrangles with the vexing, often contradictory facets of compassion. For example, the experience and articulation of compassion can reinforce the privileged position of the person who voices compassion for another by reaffirming the ethical or moral superiority of the one who has the sensitivity and fineness of feelings that would seem to be the precondition for compassion; after all, in our culture, such fine, or refined, feelings are often associated with privileged class identities (see Stearns, 1994). More than denoting a kind of emotional refinement or superiority, however, the dynamics of compassion are also sticky in light of decisions about whose suffering is serious enough to warrant compassion, and a concomitant question about how we represent suffering to ourselves and others.

Spelman's insights remind us again of the importance of distinguishing between empathetic feeling and compassionate action. Berlant (2004) voices a similar concern, particularly in light of the actions derived from feelings of compassion:

In operation, compassion is a term denoting privilege; the sufferer is *over there*. You, the compassionate one, have a resource that would alleviate someone else's suffering. But if the obligation to recognize and alleviate suffering is more than a demand on consciousness—more than a demand to *feel right* [about ameliorating an unjust scene of suffering] then it is crucial to appreciate the multitude of conventions around the relation of feeling to practice where compassion is concerned. In a given scene of suffering, how do we know what should constitute sympa-

thetic agency? (p. 4, emphasis in original)

Berlant's question demands a response that positions compassion critically and contextually, and it is a question at the heart of service-learning. How do we address the challenge of balancing empathy, compassion, and disciplinary learning in service-learning courses?

### Empathy, Compassion, and Service-Learning

As noted above, empathy and compassion are perhaps the most frequently referenced emotions in service-learning scholarship. Indeed, the notion of compassionate learning and living often functions as a kind of untheorized trope, a principal *raison d'être*, for service-learning. Teacher-scholars who promote service-learning's potential to engender multicultural awareness suggest that students who engage with needful members of their communities often develop an empathetic awareness that bridges the divide between "us" and "them" (e.g. Boss, 1994; Boyle-Baise, 2002). Those who espouse service-learning as an avenue to enhanced civic education often indicate that, because compassion motivates humans to act on an individual, personal level, as well as a social, institutional level, it is a precondition to civic engagement (e.g. Astin, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). Still others imply that, as students' empathy is enhanced through service-learning, their academic achievement is exponentially enhanced (Lundy, 2007). Consider Mastrangelo and Tischio's (2005) description of the Project Renaissance service-learning initiative, wherein college students and youth developed pen-pal relationships as part of literacy studies courses:

It was the service learning project that encouraged the students to take ownership of the information that they acquired through readings, lectures and discipline-focused assignments and use it for their own purposes—to understand the nature of the inequities that were having a negative influence on the lives of the young pen pals they had grown attached to over the year. (p. 36)

Here we see a powerful assumption underlying many explanations of service-learning goals and outcomes: the academic, personal, and civic value of service-learning is implicitly contingent on the compassionate, caring relationships that students develop with community members (in this case, their younger pen pals). Certainly, empathy may be highly relevant to the development of prosocial behavior, the reduction of social prejudice, and enhanced achievement in academic environments (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). Yet notice that empathy too often circulates as an unspoken objective and outcome—an undertheo-

ricized and naturalized unmitigated good—while the judgment-to-action feature of compassion is muted.

As we explain in the previous section, compassion is complicated, risky, and permeated with the ethics of representation and agency. We hazard significant limitations if we do not openly wrangle with those complications, risks, and ethics. Some who advocate an activist, openly political stance for service-learning express concern that the "personal" feeling of empathy or compassion may, in fact, displace the social awareness required for action, or may even reinscribe problematic power relations (e.g., Henry, 2005; Herzberg, 1994; Rosenberg, 2000). Herzberg typifies this concern:

There is a good deal of evidence from our program that service learning generates a social conscience.... Students report that their fears and prejudices diminish or disappear, that they are moved by the experience of helping others, and that they feel commitment to help more. This is a remarkable accomplishment, to be sure. But it is important to note that these responses tend, quite naturally, to be personal, to report perceptions and emotions. This is where my deepest questions about service learning lie. . . . I worry when our students report, as they frequently do, that homelessness and poverty were abstractions before they met the homeless and poor, but now they see that the homeless are people "just like themselves." (p. 308)

We share with Herzberg a concern that such identification—what can be understood as a process of empathetic mirroring—may influence students' perception that social problems such as homelessness are chiefly or only personal, rather than systemic.

Similarly, Bowdon and Scott name the phenomenon of false or faulty identification "the seduction of empathy" in *Service-Learning in Technical and Professional Communication* (2002). The empathy impulse can, according to Bowdon and Scott, be counterproductive for students who may come to see the community members and partners with whom they work as strictly the embodiment of one experience or set of experiences, and who may imagine that they can understand how that experience feels based on a superficial simulation or even observation of it. An example might be a student who claims new and clear understanding of how hard it is to be homeless based on limited time in a shelter. While we might be pleased with the students' increased awareness of important issues, the co-opting of emotion and experience is clearly problematic. Rosenberg (2000) offers an additional insight in "Beyond Empathy: Developing Critical Consciousness through Service Learning;" she notes that empathy is a precondition of *noblesse oblige*; it fosters "false generosity"—

“acts of service that simply perpetuate the status quo and thus preserve the need for service” (p. 33).

We want to emphasize here that it is absolutely vital, in critiquing empathy, to resist reinscribing a form of emotional hegemony that would posit a staunch distinction between emotionality and rationality; emotions, rather than “spoilers” in practices of meaning-making that cloud judgment, are in fact integral to the development of critical consciousness. Drawing from research in the neuroscience of decision-making, Nussbaum (2001) explains:

If we think of emotions as essential elements of human intelligence, rather than just as supports or props for intelligence, this gives us especially strong reasons to promote the conditions of emotional well-being in a political culture: for this view entails that without emotional development, a part of our reasoning capacity as political creatures will be missing. (p. 3)

This is, of course, a controversial claim within academia, which may explain in part the fact that it is not a common focus in the service-learning literature. Scholar and educational pundit Stanley Fish (2008), for example, contends that professors are trained only to teach analytical skills and the concrete information within their areas of academic expertise, and should not try to teach values (however value-laden the very idea of valueless teaching may be). Fish offers one caveat in the form of his notion of “academicizing” course content. He argues that while emotionally- and politically-charged issues will certainly emerge within classroom conversations based on course content, it is the professor’s job to guide students in considering these issues from a critical analytical perspective rather than from a moral or ethical one and he suggests in fact that professors should deny their own moral and ethical perspectives in these discussions. He explains: “To academicize a topic is to detach it from the context of its real world urgency, where there is a vote to be taken or an agenda to be embraced, and insert it into a context of academic urgency, where there is an account to be offered or an analysis to be performed” (p. 27). So while he allows that sometimes stories must be told and judgments made, what students learn in class should *not* result in action. Clearly we—like Dan Butin (2008) and others—disagree with Fish’s position and consider emotional development to be a valid objective within college courses.

Despite the perils of empathy and the politics of compassion, we do in fact believe that some college students involved in service-learning cannot only better master their course material, but expand their understanding of the human experience generally,

and that even in 15-20 hours of engagement over the course of a semester students can realize valuable changes in attitude and perspective. We do not advocate for a specific set of political or social attitudes as a result of the service-learning process; rather we seek a pedagogical model that allows students to critically engage with their own values and goals through the lens of their service experience. With that in mind, below we offer an exploratory model for managing this complicated balance between teaching course content and critical analytical skills and helping students to develop effective strategies for productive channeling of affective responses. At issue is the import of providing opportunities for our students to move from empathetic identification to the more politically engaged and active emotion of compassion. We suggest three interconnected strategies for fostering this movement in service-learning courses through the following example.

### The Course: Literature of HIV/AIDS

It is safe to say that issues of empathy and compassion arise in every service-learning course where experiential learning and human relationships are valued. Of course, material in some classes may demand more explicit attention to emotionality than others. One such course, taught at the University of Central Florida by one of the authors of this article, is Literature of HIV/AIDS. The course engages complicated layers of empathy and compassion—including “compassion fatigue” (see Moeller, 1999) which has resulted from extensive media attention to the topic of HIV/AIDS. It is a challenge to help students to push beyond a sensational interest in the subject matter and to engage meaningfully with human experience as we read testimonial, first-person narratives of illness, death, recovery, and healing, as well as a variety of fictional and scientific works on the topic. The course is an elective for students in a variety of majors and involves six objectives:

- Develop an awareness of the trajectories of literary responses to HIV/AIDS around the world since 1981;
- Develop a rudimentary understanding of scientific concepts associated with HIV/AIDS;
- Refine skills of textual and cultural analysis;
- Develop complex definitions of the terms “AIDS” and “literature” and be able to deploy those definitions effectively in assigned papers and exams;
- Develop a dynamic intellectual “map” for charting categories of HIV/AIDS literature and their realized and potential impacts; and
- Develop a sense of the global and individual

social, cultural, and political power of language through successful completion of collaborative service-learning activities.

Clearly this final goal of understanding the power of language in connection with a significant trend or event makes service-learning an appropriate element of the course. Throughout the class we ask the students to articulate the values they bring to the conversation and examine the function of language in that articulation process. Students in the class read a variety of texts to help solidify their understanding of the subject matter. But without the experiential piece—the process of working with people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH/A) in a variety of sites and contexts in our community—the course would be at best superficial and at worst disrespectful.

Students in the course have the opportunity to choose from a variety of service-learning activities including working as a phone buddy for a PLWH/A, helping to organize and participating in our local AIDS walk, distributing food and supplies to people at an AIDS services organization, serving as a technology tutor in a facility that helps people (many of whom have HIV) transitioning out of a prison setting and into life in the community, or planning and hosting a carnival for local children living with HIV. Through these experiences the students confront their assumptions about HIV/AIDS and people living with the virus. They learn about some of the economic and social realities surrounding the issues about which they have read. As one student reflected, “It changed everything to see these kids and picture them driving 15 minutes from their houses to come to our event.”

These activities help students integrate the powerful impact of first-person narratives and scientific explanations of HIV and AIDS in class readings with their own lives that typically involve little first-person awareness of HIV/AIDS, or at least little that is acknowledged in class. This combination of learning opportunities asks students to move beyond empathy—an empathy that often surprises them as they complete their readings—to take compassionate and purposeful action toward and on behalf of people in their community. They read about a gay poet who contracted HIV in the early 1980s and watched an entire generation of his contemporaries suffer with the illness, a doctor who cared for indigent PLWH/A in the early 1990s, and a young boy in South Africa who spent his last months of life making his voice heard by political leaders around the globe. Most of the students have little in common with these subjects demographically, but the power of language helps them to see potential connections. Simultaneously they are working with people affected by HIV who deal every

day with the challenges and opportunities their status yields and who live and work in our community. This combination of globally- and locally-focused learning opportunities solidifies their learning and understanding of key concepts in the course. The experience helps them to see that neither book characters nor real people need to be perfect or heroic to deserve and inspire their compassion.

### Strategies for “Teaching” Compassion

The Literature of HIV/AIDS course certainly engages the perils of empathy and the politics of compassion, as its subject matter can be said to invite maudlin over-identification, polarizing political and religious reactions, and a world of opportunities to offend and upset classmates. As noted above, we have identified three strategies to ensure that a service-learning course meets the intellectual and emotional objectives crucial for deep learning and to maintain a balanced focus on intellectual and affective elements of the learning experience. Below we identify those strategies and explain briefly how they can be accomplished through service and reflection within a course such as Literature of HIV/AIDS.

*Strategy One: Work with students to theorize emotions, to help them understand that, though some emotional response may be an effect of biology (such as the operation of mirror neurons), emotions are nonetheless shaped by cultural relationships and expectations.* To this end we need to encourage students to develop a vocabulary of affect, a means of discussing emotions in productive ways that do not reproduce the common perspective that emotions are exclusively personal and idiosyncratic experiences. In the Literature of HIV/AIDS course we accomplish this by asking students to carefully document their affective experiences with both the written texts they read for the course as well as their service-learning experiences. By conducting “objective” rhetorical analysis of books and articles and coming to understand the ways in which certain storytelling and reporting practices used by authors created corresponding affective responses within themselves as readers, students are able to defamiliarize concepts like hero or villain, tragedy or comedy, and see how those notions function within texts. Reading and analyzing texts ranging from overtly political and inflammatory essays to intimate and emotional poems helps students develop vocabulary for identifying emotions and the manifold ways in which they can be expressed, as well as connecting them with rhetorical actions. Then, by comparing their analysis of responses to texts with their reflections on their service-learning experiences, the students are encouraged to consider their impulses to see certain kinds of people as heroes or victims and to more fully

explore how their own emotions, including empathy and compassion, function in their processing of written texts and lived experiences. With this understanding, the students can collaborate and often argue with one another to uncover cultural forces that shape their responses, including their tendencies to feel sad, angry, sorry, or compassionate toward a given person they encounter in their reading or service-learning. Helping students distinguish among sympathy, pity, empathy, and compassion is vital, particularly insofar as it leads to a second important effort.

*Strategy Two: Bring to the fore questions of the ethics of representation and action that accompany compassion.* Students in service-learning classes may particularly struggle with questions about the appropriateness of their compassion for certain categories of people when they feel obligated to analyze the sufferers' culpability for their own problems. Many students in the Literature of HIV/AIDS course must fight a societal tendency to create a hierarchy of those deserving compassion ranging from innocent victims (children, hemophiliacs, betrayed wives) and guilty carriers (IV drug users, gay men, people who are promiscuous) with a middle range including people who are too poor or naïve to protect themselves from infection. To work through this challenge we consider the work of Cindy Patton (1990) in *Inventing AIDS*, who helps students to recognize the cognitive and emotional maneuvers people make to accommodate their complex emotional reactions to HIV/AIDS. Critiquing common models for teaching young people about AIDS, Patton argues:

HIV education must always be political. HIV/AIDS education either reinscribes the sexual, class, and racial ideologies that are propped up by moralism and science, or disrupts the hierarchical formations of knowledge and opens up space for groups and communities to work out their interrelationships with information *they* have decided is relevant. (p. 105, emphasis in original)

The service-learning experience asks students to take up this challenge. To develop a compassionate response, students have to push past a need to imagine themselves in similar circumstances to feel generosity toward sufferers. They must be able to have compassion for someone whose behavior they cannot necessarily understand. As Spelman (1997) explains, "Sometimes the use of other people's experience of suffering to make sense of our own turns out to be a way to exploit their labor; I acknowledge your suffering only to the extent to which it promises to bring attention to my own. You sow the seeds, I pluck the fruits of sorrow" (p. 172). It is crucial to keep students from falling into this kind of emotion-

al voyeurism, which Bowdon and Scott (2002) have deemed a highly seductive impulse.

As students come to understand their own and their classmates' reactions to textual and experiential learning, we ask questions together about who tells the stories of these experiences and what kinds of ethical responsibilities the students themselves have when representing those stories to others both in and beyond the service-learning experience. Our discussions emulate the process of "testimonial reading" forwarded by Megan Boler's (1999) discussion of teaching holocaust literature. Boler asks students to wrangle with the following questions:

Who benefits from the production of empathy in what circumstances? Who should feel empathy for whom? If no change can be measured as a result of the production of empathy, what has been gained other than a 'good brotherly feeling' on the part of the universal reader? (p. 164)

As we reflect on these questions and our experiences outside the classroom, the students come to understand better why activists in the 1980s eschewed the label of "AIDS patient" or "AIDS victim" and chose instead the acronym PLWA and later PLWH/A as a united term that described their commitment to living rather than essentializing them based on their disease status. Working together, the students see that there are more and less ethical models for representing the experiences—painful and triumphant, exceptional and mundane—of others. And this helps them to develop processes for advocating for and representing people in their own work as writers, students, professionals, and citizens even as they reconsider their own deeply held beliefs.

*Strategy Three: Carefully scaffold pedagogical practices to create opportunities for ethical and purposeful engagement, and recognize that we cannot and should not expect compassion to "naturally" arise as we interact with community members and partners.* Testimonial reading practices and structured reflection activities are integral to the study of HIV/AIDS literature. In this class we read and discuss theoretical texts about the cultural meanings and functions of HIV/AIDS, scientific texts about the medical aspects of HIV/AIDS, and literary texts about the stories of HIV/AIDS. Simultaneously, students engage in service-learning experiences that bring all of these elements together, challenging them to leave the course with compassionate goals but stopping far short of prescribing their resulting feelings or actions. We add a powerful dimension by asking students to work directly with people in the community affected by HIV/AIDS, including those carrying the virus as well as their family members and caregivers, but also working with people in the com-

munity who consider themselves to be safe or exempt from the syndrome, including many students on our campus. By balancing the familiar and the unfamiliar in our readings and our service opportunities we keep students engaged in a process of testing and growing their intellectual and affective responses to the course work. In the next section we offer more insight into the complexities of empathy and compassion when students work to articulate their knowledge about HIV/AIDS to their campus peers.

### Candy and Condoms: Reflections on Empathy and Compassion in Service-Learning

Students in the literature of HIV/AIDS course can participate in a wide range of community-based HIV/AIDS related service activities as described above, but one activity we always do together on our own campus, usually on the Wednesday of the week before spring break or another vacation, is called “Candy and Condoms.” We reserve a table in our campus’s weekly marketplace amongst other organizations, from our campus NORML chapter to ROTC to various clubs and church-affiliated groups. In addition to candy and condoms, we pass out information sheets about HIV statistics around the world, the nation, and the state; we include data from our community and our campus and encourage students who have sex over spring break to do so with protection. Though a certain number of students invariably come to the table and grab a large number of condoms with a flourish or take a few with a shy smile, by and large students tend to avoid our table.

Instead of alerting students to this common response in advance, we have found it to be more effective to let them have the full experience of interacting with familiar people in an unfamiliar way. When we move our conversation about safe sex and gender politics and death and disease out of the relatively intimate space of the classroom and into the sunny campus center, students often rethink and re-feel their course experience. Seeing industrial size boxes of condoms provided by a local AIDS services organization captures their attention, makes them slightly uncomfortable, and challenges them to see their peers in a new way. One semester, after an uninspiring first hour during which dozens of students walked quickly away from the table after seeing the condoms, one creative student got the idea of taping the condoms to lollipops and other candy items that were already taped to information sheets. This bait and switch maneuver allowed us to distribute a record-breaking number of condoms and fact sheets to unsuspecting students with sweet teeth. This was critical, because after a couple of months of reading

about HIV/AIDS from a range of perspectives and conducting service-learning activities, the students were passionate about encouraging their fellow students to get tested and to protect themselves and their partners from infection. Most were surprised to find it so difficult to discuss safe sex with peers, even as raising awareness in our campus community emerged as a vital goal of our course.

When we conducted a group reflection soon after the event, the students began by complaining that the effort wasn’t as successful as they’d hoped: people didn’t want to take condoms from strangers or even friends, it turned out, and each student could recount numerous examples of people moving quickly away to avoid discussing this awkward topic. But one or more students in the class could definitely commiserate with their embarrassed colleagues on the mall. Each time we have coordinated the Candy and Condoms event, a few students prefer to create a fact sheets or sit in the background while their more gregarious classmates tape condoms on their shirts, circulate among their fellow students, etc. Often these reticent students thrive when it comes to other service-learning activities that involve working with people who have HIV and their families, but they sometimes seem offended by this event. Though they have little trouble claiming compassion for the PLWH/As they work with in other projects, it can be harder for them to feel compassion for their campus peers who might have different sexual standards from their own. They struggle with the relationship between empathy and compassion as they process this experience.

As with all service-learning activities on our campus, students have the right to opt out of any activity that contradicts their religious or moral convictions, but historically none have avoided this project. Each year during the reflection on the Candy and Condoms event there is a powerful moment when the students recognize how complex identification is—how what they have learned in our course separates them in some ways from their peers. Some determine for themselves how important it is that they find whatever quiet ways they can to convey a message that people just don’t want to hear: that HIV infection is a real concern on college campuses; that no matter how much HIV has been characterized as a manageable illness in popular media and culture, it is not something students want to contract or spread due to unconsidered decisions; that we need to have sensitivity and concern for people struggling and suffering right here among us. The students, when encouraged to reflect deeply, report feeling less connected with their own peers encountered during this event than with the PLWH/As they meet while completing their other service-learning activities. Despite Trout’s



(2009) contention that we are generally more empathetic toward people who are obviously like us, it is clear to the students in such moments that empathy is about more than shared demographics or even shared experiences. They recognize that being able to understand someone's point of view and experience can be sometimes just as alienating as not understanding it. And they realize, as a group, that this breakdown in the empathy process helps them to see themselves and see how ideas and feelings about HIV circulate in their community. This moment—when students anticipate a connection with their fellow university students and do not experience it in the way they expect to—teaches them more about HIV/AIDS and their own lives than anything we read in books. They reflect on a sense of alienation, stigma, distrust...they worry that people think they must have HIV because they are studying and talking about it...and this experience is significant in their learning. At this moment and in others we share research from Critical Emotion Studies and discuss the ways empathy functions as an indelibly political emotion. We also discuss the possibilities for social change when we intentionally shift our experiences of empathy to the feeling/action of compassion. We take the opportunity to consider Nussbaum's criteria for compassion and consider ways in which this experience does and does not meet them, asking whether students can see the suffering of those they encounter as serious, believe that the sufferer does not deserve to suffer, and feel an identification with the sufferer.

Not every student is significantly moved by the service-learning experiences in this or any course. Some are seeking a more earth-shatteringly traumatic experience or a more heart-warming one. Others don't fully engage because of scheduling problems or other distractions. But when the subject matter of a course is inherently about emotion and politics and human intimacy, it is disingenuous to fail to allow students to engage with those elements as course content, and presenting the perspective of Critical Emotion Studies can be a powerful way to accomplish that goal.

## Conclusion

As Boler argues in *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (1999), educators and politicians have long argued that democracy can be cultivated through specific emotional orientations, and empathy is the most commonly evoked emotion for this purpose of social and ethical development (p. 156). Too often, however, the notion of empathy-as-democratic is oversimplified, as we have attempted to illustrate here through a complex, genuine example. Yet we do believe that empathy's perils are worth the risk to

reach compassion's politics in service-learning pedagogy and theory. Service-learning teacher/scholars, like their service-learning students, are bound to feel different levels of comfort when it comes to discussing emotion overtly in our classes. It is important to note, however, that we are not promoting a confessional class dynamic where lines between the personal and the private disappear. Instead, we are suggesting that unless we work toward pedagogies that denaturalize emotionality, we risk reaffirming forms of emotional hegemony that reproduce a rational/emotional split, that reaffirm the entitlement politics so closely associated with empathy, that stunt compassionate action through the studied inattention to the interconnectedness of feeling/thinking/doing. Critical Emotion Studies researchers have made great strides toward understanding the politics of affect and the cost of emotional hegemony in the last decade. Service-learning has the potential to make an important contribution to that research.

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## Authors

### LISA LANGSTRAAT

(Lisa.Langstraat@colostate.edu) is associate professor of English at Colorado State University, where she has directed the MA Program in Rhetoric and Composition, the CSU Writing Center and the Writing Across the Curriculum Program. She is a service-learning fellow at CSU, where she developed the Graduate Teaching Certificate programs, including certification in service-learning instruction. She teaches both graduate and undergraduate service-learning courses. Dr. Langstraat has published widely in the area of Critical Emotion Studies, and her current research focuses on community Restorative Justice Programs. She teaches Victim Empathy courses to juvenile offenders and is a trained Restorative Justice Facilitator for the Fort Collins RESTORE and Restorative Justice Conferencing Program, as well as for the CSU Office of Conflict Resolution.

MELODY BOWDON (mbowdon@mail.ucf.edu), director of the Karen L. Smith Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning and associate professor of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Central Florida, has served as senior research fellow for Florida Campus Compact since 2005. She is co-author of *Service-Learning in Technical and Professional Communication* with Blake Scott and co-editor of *Scholarship for Sustaining Service-Learning and Civic Engagement* with Shelley Billig and Barbara Holland. Her volume co-edited with Russell Carpenter, *Higher Education, Emerging Technologies and Community Partnerships: Concepts, Models, and Applications*, is forthcoming in 2011 from IGI Global. Bowdon has served as a Guardian ad Litem in her community and volunteers regularly in local public schools. She and her service-learning students have worked with more than 90 local nonprofit organizations and other groups in central Florida over the past 10 years.